

## **SELF-PERCEPTION IN WRITING: THE EFFECTS OF WRITING WORKSHOP AND TRADITIONAL INSTRUCTION ON INTERMEDIATE GRADE STUDENTS**

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*This study compared the self-perception—specifically in terms of writing—of fourth- and fifth-grade students whose teachers used a writing workshop approach with those whose teachers used a traditional approach. The measure used was the Writer Self-Perception Scale (Bottomley, Henk, & Melnick, 1997/1998). No significant differences were found between the scores of students who had been taught by the two teaching approaches. The findings of this study suggest that individual teachers are more important than strategies or approaches in affecting the writer self-perception of intermediate-grade children.*

In the early 1970s, researchers such as Emig (1971), Elbow (1973), and Graves (1973, 1975) encouraged educators to focus on writing more as a process than as a product. This led to a reconsideration of teaching methods and an attempt to place more value on student autonomy. Attitudes, beliefs, and self-perceptions of students received greater attention. The writing workshop surfaced as an approach to apply this new perspective. The purpose of this study was to compare the self-perception—specifically in terms of writing—of fourth- and fifth-grade students whose teachers used a writing workshop with those whose teachers used traditional writing instruction.

### **Two Approaches to Writing Instruction**

Beane, Lipka, and Ludewig (1980) characterize traditional instruction as “custodial,” concerned primarily with order and procedures, and writing workshop as “humanistic,” more flexible and demo-

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cratic. This dichotomy underpins the representation of each approach.

### *Traditional Writing Instruction*

The traditional approach to writing instruction is portrayed by some as teacher-controlled (Bartlett, 1994), emphasizing preprinted materials such as textbooks and worksheets (Funk & Funk, 1989). Instruction is organized around a series of skills determined by the teacher to be necessary, usually taught without a writing context (Tidwell & Steele, 1995). Grammar and the conventions of writing are stressed. Topics, audience, and time allowed for writing are usually managed by the teacher.

Traditional writing instruction is typically given to the whole class and rarely integrated with other subjects. When students work on projects, they are generally kept together at the same stage in the writing process. Assessment is usually product-oriented, and students share their writing on a limited basis—usually only with the teacher.

### *The Writing Workshop Approach*

The writing workshop approach is rooted in several instructional approaches to the writing process as described by Atwell (1987), Bissex (1980), Calkins (1986), Despain (1992), Graves (1983), and Lensmire (1994). Although small differences exist in the application, the major components remain the same.

Typically, the writing workshop begins with teacher sharing time (5–10 minutes), during which teachers may present poems, songs, and stories, or they may share some of their own writing at various stages of completion (Graves, 1983). This is followed by a mini-lesson (5–10 minutes), during which the teacher gives direct instruction about writing, usually to the whole class but occasionally to smaller groups when appropriate. The concepts, procedures, and skills that are taught during mini-lessons are usually based on needs the teacher observes in the students' writing (Calkins, 1986). A procedure called "state of the class" (5 minutes) follows, during which the teacher and students determine where each child is in the writing process and what activities will occur during work time. During the next 30–40 minutes, students work independently, in

small groups, or with the teacher on any phase of the writing process. The workshop concludes with a sharing time (5–10 minutes), during which children share their writings with their peers.

During writing workshop sessions, students typically choose their own topics and genres. At any given time, students are at different stages in the writing process, and seating patterns within the room are flexible to allow for activities such as peer revision or sharing. Assessment includes a focus on the writing process as well as on the finished work, and students use a variety of materials for writing activities.

Foertsch (1992) claims that, although some educators are moving from an emphasis on traditional, workbook-based writing instruction towards a more holistic approach, such change “appears to be an extremely slow process” (p. 6). In 1995, Hasit and Sullivan reported a trend toward more child-centered practices, including use of process writing and other writing workshop activities. They noted that, while teachers may consider making changes in the ways they teach writing, writing workshop strategies were still not being widely implemented.

### *Similarities and Differences*

The two teaching approaches have some elements in common. On a broad level, all writing teachers help their students make sense of their lives and prepare their students to engage in various forms of written discourse. Kellman (1997) claims that writing teachers help students “to think clearly and cogently and to convey those thoughts to others” (p. 16). Additionally, there is widespread agreement that in order to improve their writing students need to be engaged in extensive reading of literature. Most writing teachers agree on the importance of learning conventions—“orderly thinking, grammar, spelling, and a sense of purpose and audience” (Madian, 1997, p. 17). Murray (1995) notes that traditional conventions of written language, such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling, are simply the pattern that successful writers have established in the past to communicate meaning. Many teachers from both perspectives work to create an environment that allows students to take risks in their writing.

In spite of similarities, however, traditional writing instruction clearly differs from writing workshop in several essential as-

pects: the roles of teachers and students (Lensmire, 1994; Tidwell & Steele, 1995), time spent in writing (Cropper, 1997), student ownership of their writing (Atwell, 1991), and assessment (Tidwell & Steele, 1995).

### *Concerns About Traditional Writing Programs*

One obvious concern about a traditional approach is low student motivation. Some students may feel that topics for writing are not meaningful to them when they are selected by their teachers. When students feel such a lack of ownership, they seem to care more about getting through their writing assignments than about getting through to their readers.

Another concern of traditional instruction is that while skills are taught and stressed, they are usually not addressed in a meaningful context. Harris and Graham (1995) write, "Despite their popularity, activities that concentrate on grammar, punctuation, or usage often are not embedded in actual writing experiences and do not improve students' writing" (p. 15). This may be at least partially due to the fact that "most of the criteria by which students' school-sponsored writing is evaluated concern the accidents rather than the essences of discourse—that is, spelling, punctuation, penmanship, and length rather than thematic development, rhetorical and syntactic sophistication, and fulfillment of intent" (Emig, 1971, p. 93). Smuin (1993) warns that with such emphasis on mechanics, children will learn "only to write what they can spell; they will only use a simple sentence structure, they will not choose any topics or approaches that are risky; and most important, they will never learn the joy of writing" (p. 13).

Many times in traditional instruction little explicit teaching of writing occurs. When a teacher assigns a topic and students are expected to write about it, their writing turns into an assessment rather than a learning experience. Proett and Gill (1986) demonstrate that little correlation exists between teacher correction of student work and subsequent improvement. In 1984, Applebee found that students spend much of the day in rote exercises and that they spend less than 5% of the typical school day actually writing.

*Concerns About the Writing Workshop Approach*

One of the most frequently voiced concerns about the writing workshop approach has to do with classroom management. When observing a writing workshop, "Traditionalists . . . might think 'disorder,' 'no discipline,' or 'poor classroom management skills'" (McAndrew, 1998, p. 444). Additionally, some teachers hesitate to deliberately step down from a position of authority (Illig, Elliott, & Bieger, 1995).

Administrators and parents sometimes view the writing workshop as being a less systematic approach to skill instruction. They worry that students will not be exposed to the entire scope and sequence of skills that will be included on standardized tests (Sudol & Sudol, 1991). Another concern that has been voiced about the writing workshop approach is its lack of structure and precision. While many students find ambiguity challenging and exciting (Knudson, 1995), others feel differently. In a 1988 study, Knudson found that some students in first through fourth grades preferred unambiguous tasks, such as workbooks, over writing stories and reports.

Perhaps the most serious concern with the writing workshop, however, is addressed by Lensmire (1994), who points out that the primary axiom underlying such an approach is that children and teachers are all interested in making the change and getting it right. He asserts that if the children do not cooperate, even the best and most committed teacher will not be able to make the writing workshop succeed.

*Effects on Achievement*

For children in the very early grades of school, a writing workshop approach has been shown to have a more positive effect on achievement than a traditional approach. Varble (1990) analyzed writing samples of 120 second graders in both holistic and traditional writing classrooms. Significant differences favoring the holistic approach were found when writing samples were evaluated for meaning and content. Similarly, in a six-month study of 51 second graders Monteith (1991) found that writing process students scored significantly higher on a standardized achievement measure than

those receiving traditional instruction. However, for students in the intermediate grades little difference has been found in levels of achievement between students taught with a writing workshop approach and with a traditional approach. Varble (1990) also examined writing samples of 128 sixth graders and found no significant differences between whole language and traditional groups in meaning, content, or mechanics.

### **Self-Perception**

Although some research questions the relevance of self-perception to academic achievement (Johnson, 1998; Kahne, 1996; Krauthammer, 1990), positive self-perception has frequently been linked with academic success (Beane et al., 1980; Kohn, 1994; Marsh & Young, 1997; Weisman, 1991). Wiggins, Schatz, and West (1994) cite research spanning more than 20 years (Bloom, 1977; Clemes & Bean, 1981; Wiggins, 1978, 1987) demonstrating that self-esteem is related to school achievement. Other researchers report similar findings (O'Dell, Rak, Chermonte, & Hamlin, 1994; Pajares, 1995).

Self-perception is believed to affect learning "by influencing an individual's choice of activities, task avoidance, effort expenditure, and goal persistence" (Henk & Melnick, 1995, p. 471). O'Dell et al. (1994) and other researchers claim that self-concept influences motivation and, in turn, achievement.

The literature seems to support a relationship between positive self-perception and academic success generally; however, self-perception can also be viewed in specific domains such as writing. There is a need for more research to focus on domain-specific self-perception. Few studies have looked specifically at writer self-perception: how students view themselves as writers.

### **Purpose**

Proponents of the writing workshop have long expressed the belief that a writing workshop approach can improve affective factors such as motivation and self-perception, regardless of its effect on achievement. Bottomley, Truscott, Marinak, Henk, and Melnick (1999) conclude that if there is no significant difference between achievement scores of students taught by a whole language ap-

proach and those taught by a traditional approach, but a significant difference in attitudes is found, then teachers should be encouraged to use a whole language approach, such as the writing workshop. The purpose of this study was to compare the writer self-perception of fourth and fifth grade students taught using a traditional approach to writing instruction with that of students taught by a writing workshop approach.

### Methodology

This study used a true experimental design with stratified random assignment of students to classes using a random number table: Students were stratified by grade level (4th or 5th) and then assigned randomly to classes and to teachers by the principal of the school. This design is a posttest-only control group design, which allows researchers to assume that the groups were “equal” before treatment without a pretest (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, p. 25). Students who were placed in certain classes as a result of parental choice or other factors were deleted from the sample, as were students who failed to return signed informed consent forms. While each teacher taught approximately the same number of students, certain students were thus not included in the study. This accounts for the variation in numbers seen in Table 1.

### Participants

Participants were 130 fourth- and fifth-grade students at a suburban elementary school in Utah. Intermediate students were selected because of their particular level of cognitive development, which impacts their writing (Bissex, 1980; Blake, 1990; Griffin, Smith, & Burrell, 1995; Hill & Ruptic, 1994).

Teachers were not randomly assigned to teaching methods;

**TABLE 1.** Cell Structure of the Research Design

Grade	Writing Workshop		Traditional Instruction		Total
	Instr. 1	Instr. 2	Instr. 1	Instr. 2	
Fourth	n = 14	n = 12	n = 9	n = 23	58
Fifth	n = 16	n = 19	n = 17	n = 20	72
	61		69		130

however, the identification procedures used ensured representative samples of each treatment. Teachers at the school were familiar with traditional methods of writing instruction, and all had received training from the same presenter the previous year regarding the writing process and the routines of the writing workshop. However, each teacher was free to choose his or her preferred method. Allowing teachers to select their own methods rather than assigning them to a method was a limitation in terms of randomization, but an advantage in that none of the teachers was unwillingly using a method contrary to personal theoretical orientation.

From a total of 12 fourth- and fifth-grade teachers, researchers used "extreme case selection" (McKenna, Stratton, Grindler, & Jenkins, 1995, p. 33) to identify 8 teachers, based on a checklist (Pollington, 1999) adapted from Reutzel and Cooter (1996) and McGrath (1997). Each of the 12 teachers was observed by two researchers simultaneously ( $r = 0.997$ ), and information on items which could not be easily observed, such as assessment, was obtained in interviews with teachers and students. From these observations, 4 teachers were identified as using a writing workshop approach and 4 as using a traditional approach—2 of each orientation from fourth grade and 2 of each from fifth grade. These eight classes became the experimental and control groups. The mean score on the checklist of the 4 writing workshop teachers was 78 out of a possible 100 points ( $SD = 12.9$ ) with a range of 58–94. The mean score of the 4 traditional teachers was 11.6 ( $SD = 4.6$ ) with a range of 9–20. Throughout the year, each classroom was visited four times by the observers, each visit lasting approximately one hour. The checklists were completed each time to ensure that the teachers remained consistent in their instruction. The result of the student and teacher selection process is shown in Table 1.

### *Traditional Writing Instruction Classrooms*

The teachers in the four traditional classrooms, all female, had taught for 2 to 21 years. All of them demonstrated a high degree of teacher control, especially in areas such as choice of topic, genre, and audience. For example, one teacher told the children when to start writing and how long to write. Another teacher assigned only essay and report writing. When skill instruction was needed,



classes were taught as a whole, with few efforts to integrate writing with other subjects.

Attempts were made by most teachers to implement some form of the writing process, perhaps due to the inservice training presented the previous year. However, traditional teachers implemented the process in a lock-step manner. Students were generally all kept at the same stage in the writing process. For example, one teacher assigned all students to revise together on the same day by adding adjectives to a story they had previously written. In another classroom students read a poem in unison from the chalkboard and then copied it into their "writing books." Seating was fixed in all traditional classrooms. If the students were not at desks, they were assigned to their places at tables. The use of preprinted materials such as textbooks and worksheets was prevalent. The walls were mostly decorated with preprinted posters, rather than with student- or teacher-made materials.

The audience for the students' writing was usually the teacher. Students were not invited to share their writing, and all of the traditional teachers told their students not to talk with each other, but to work in silence. In place of sharing time, papers were collected or students were dismissed before finishing a piece of work. Teachers and students both emphasized writing assessment as formal, based on finished pieces of work.

### *Writing Workshop Classrooms*

Writing workshop teachers had between 3 and 24 years of teaching experience; two were male and two female. In contrast to the traditional classes, in writing workshop classes students generally chose their own topics and selected the genre at least part of the time. In every writing workshop classroom, skill instruction was given during the mini-lesson phase to the whole class or to small groups. This instruction was usually based on needs that had surfaced from students' writing.

In all these classrooms, students were at different stages in the writing process, even when they were working on a district-mandated topic. Teachers used all phases of the writing workshop, but few teachers used every phase every day, and the times spent on each phase varied from teacher to teacher.

Seating patterns within the rooms were flexible during the

workshop phase to allow for activities such as peer revision or shared writing. For example, in the class of one fourth-grade teacher, desks were ordinarily in straight rows, but during the workshop the children moved desks and sat in corners, on carpets, in a “nest” of coats, or wherever they desired for the task at hand. Clipboards were used so the children could write anywhere in the room. In addition to pencil and paper or writing books, writing workshop students also used a variety of other materials—such as cardstock, stickers, and colored pens for a book cover or greeting card; stationery and envelopes for letters. A fifth-grade teacher’s class presented their work on advertising and reporting in displays made from real newspapers with a hole torn out for each student’s piece.

Writing projects often had a genuine student-selected audience in mind, such as parents or “buddy readers” from a lower class. In all the writing workshop classrooms, students shared their writing in various ways. One teacher had a microphone for students to use, and another constructed a “cave” in the hallway as a nook for sharing writing. All writing workshop teachers stated that assessment was usually informal, with points assigned for participation in the writing process as well as for the finished work; this was confirmed by the students in interviews.

### *Instrument*

The Writer Self-Perception Scale (WSPS), developed by Bottomley et al. (1997/1998), was normed with students in fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, making it particularly appropriate for this study. This is the first scale of its kind to be normed nationally. The WSPS was designed to measure writer self-perception on five dimensions: General Progress, Specific Progress, Observational Comparison, Social Feedback, and Physiological States. The instrument consists of 38 statements about writing; one of these, Number 15, is a general item (“I think I am a good writer”), while the remaining 37 may be divided among the five areas of specific interest. Some of these items deal with overall writing ability, while others are more specific, looking at such concepts as organization, vocabulary choice, etc. All items are stated in a positive format with five possible responses: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

### Procedure

Once the experimental and control groups had been identified, written consent was obtained from teachers, parents, and students. Observations and student interviews were conducted by the researchers periodically throughout the year.

At the end of the school year, the WSPS was administered to all participating fourth- and fifth-grade students in the eight classes selected, and scores were calculated. Pre- and posttesting was not considered necessary because students were assigned to groups randomly. Administration and scoring procedures were followed exactly as specified in the instructions accompanying the survey.

### Results

A mean score and standard deviation for each of the five scales (General Progress, Specific Progress, Observational Comparison, Social Feedback, and Physiological States) were calculated as recommended by Bottomley et al. (1997/1998). These scores are reported in Table 2.

The raw scores on each of the five scales were summed yielding a total score with a value range of 37–185. A univariate analysis of variance revealed no statistically significant differences between the scores of the two groups, with the exception of the interaction of teacher effects with grade and treatment. Table 3 shows the results of the ANOVA performed using total scores.

Additional analyses revealed no significant differences between

**TABLE 2.** Descriptive Statistics for Writer Self-Perception Scale (WSPS) by Type of Literacy Instruction

Literacy Instruction	n	General Progress		Specific Progress		Observational Comparison		Social Feedback		Physiological States	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Traditional Instruction	69	4.43	.44	4.33	.54	3.32	.67	3.90	.63	4.04	.87
Writing Workshop	61	4.29	.66	4.14	.53	3.04	.74	3.70	.65	3.71	.97

*Note.* The WSPS is based on a 5-point scale.

**TABLE 3.** Analysis of Variance of Total Scores

Source	df	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Grade (G)	1	0.27	0.63
Treatment (T)	1	2.11	0.22
G × T	1	0.08	0.79
Instructor (G × T)	4	3.75	0.007*

\* = significant at 0.05

treatments on any of the individual scales of the WSPS. Table 4 summarizes the results of these tests.

### Discussion

Writing workshop proponents have assumed that this method of teaching should produce significantly higher writer self-perception than traditional approaches for the following reasons. Bunce-Crim (1991) asserts that if students are to feel good about themselves and to enjoy writing, “They must be active participants in the writing process, conversing with each other, raising questions, making decisions, and evaluating themselves” (p. 38). Atwell (1998), Calkins (1994), and Graves (1983) agree that three basics are necessary for students to become good writers: time, ownership, and response. Writing workshop can provide children with these basics by giving autonomy and control to the student as well as to the teacher. In such a setting, the teacher is no longer an authoritarian figure, but rather someone who guides students and supports their learning (Bartlett, 1994).

However, the data in this study do not support such an assumption. There are several possible reasons for these results. Teachers could have been teaching writing in ways inconsistent

**TABLE 4.** Analysis of Variance for Raw Scores for Each Scale of the Writer Self-Perception Scale (WSPS)

Scales of WSPS	<i>F</i> (1, 4)	<i>p</i>
General Progress	3.97	0.12
Specific Progress	1.44	0.30
Observational Comparison	2.91	0.16
Social Feedback	2.24	0.21
Physiological States	0.26	0.64

with their personal philosophies, but measures were taken to control for that possibility. Similarly, teachers could have been inconsistent in their implementation of writing strategies, but observations throughout the year indicated otherwise. Perhaps implementation for one school year was not long enough for effects to emerge, although Strech (1994) reported attitude differences in less time. Since students were randomly assigned to treatment groups, findings were likely not the result of differences among students, but possibly a study involving a larger number of participants might obtain statistically significant results.

Regardless of the reasons, the results of this study are not unique. In a comparison of attitudes among children taught by whole language, literature-based, and basal literacy instruction, the developers of the WSPS found no overall significant differences in self-perception scores among children taught according to those three literacy approaches (Bottomley et al., 1999), although they did find that mean scores for literature-based classrooms were significantly higher than those for either basal or whole language on all of the scales except General Progress. Other studies, while not specifically focused on the relationship between teaching method and writer self-perception, have reported similar findings. Jackson's study (1996) of students in second and third grades found no significant difference in attitude between students in a process writing class and others in a control group. In a study of reading achievement and attitude involving 1,631 children in grades 1-5, McKenna et al. (1995) found no main effect for instructional approach. Stahl, McKenna, and Pagnucco (1994) examined 14 studies, reporting that 11 showed no significant differences.

Strech (1994) did find that the percentage of students who reported liking to write went from 48% before implementation of the writing workshop to 78% five weeks later. However, she admitted that the change could be due to implementation of the writing workshop, to teacher enthusiasm, or to both. She also conceded that her sample size was too small to permit generalizations. Studying four classes of fourth-grade students in California, Grisham (1993) found no significant differences in achievement when comparing whole language and traditional approaches. On a test of attitude, however, students of one whole language teacher and one traditional teacher scored significantly higher than others in the study, suggesting that individual teachers can be important factors

in student attitude. Turner and Paris (1995), observing 6-year-olds, concluded that "the most reliable indicator of motivation was not the type of [literacy] program that districts follow, but the actual daily tasks that teachers provided students in their classrooms" (p. 664). Stahl et al. (1994) also reported strong teacher effects in the 14 studies they reviewed. The present study also shows significant teacher effects. Smuin (1993) concluded that "the single most important ingredient of an exciting, creative, stimulating classroom is . . . the teacher" (p. 1).

The findings of this study seem to support the conclusion of Harris and Graham (1995) who wrote, "There exists no set of strategies that guarantee effective writing" (p. 7), and Traw (1996) who argued that no one method will suit every child or every teacher. Teachers should use instructional methods grounded in their individual philosophies about teaching writing. This could include traditional teacher-driven approaches, student-driven methods such as writing workshop, or some other form of "balanced instruction marked by principled eclecticism" (McKenna et al., 1995, p. 41), blending the advantages of more than one method. Bottomley et al. (1999) also recommend further research to determine which elements of literacy instruction are "more conducive to building a positive affect towards literacy" (p. 128). Particularly helpful would be longitudinal studies, since this study, like that of McKenna et al. (1995), necessarily treats writing workshop and traditional instruction as "monolithic approaches subject to little or no variance" (p. 32), and makes no allowance for the effects of previous teachers or home environment. Additionally, further research into teacher effect would be enlightening. It would also be profitable to study other aspects of children's writing experiences, such as quantity and quality of writing produced and relationships between self-perception and achievement.

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